

His Second Self

—A Story of Dual Personalities, Love and Intrigue—By Victor Rousseau

SYNOPSIS

Joan Wentworth, a country girl, is employed as a nurse in the Southern hospital at Avonmouth, presided over by Dr. John Lancaster, a bully and a man of loose character. She faints during her first operation, and she goes to his house to try to get her position back. To her astonishment Lancaster appears altogether different; he is manifestly ill, and gentle with her. He says she needs a change and offers her a temporary post, while her case is being considered, at the Institute in the hill country, founded by his father with the Lancaster fund. Joan goes to Lancaster (the name of the hill village) and finds a disfigured old building, with a colored doctor, a matron, and a crazed woman, Mrs. Dana, who is locked in her room. There is a superintendent named Myers, whom Joan dislikes. Next day she is surprised to see Lancaster come down to the institute. She has a quarrel with Myers, who takes her into the doctor's room and shows her Lancaster incensed from an overdose of morphine. Joan discovers that he is addicted to the drug.

FIFTH INSTALLMENT

The Fight Begins

JOAN had had supper with Lancaster, and it was night, and once more the fight was raging. She had sat on the veranda with him, had talked with him, had seen the better side of the man rising to the surface as he struggled with the morphine devil; then she had given him his half dose again, and, as his strength revived and the agony departed, she had seen the face, lying spirit enter into him. Now he was lying, wrapped in his dressing gown, upon his bed, and she sat at his side, at grips with the devil in him that clamored for its victim's body. It might possess it entirely, as surely as a devil as any spirit of evil, the its shrine was a little glass bottle holding a few drops of fluid.

She was fighting for Lancaster, fighting for the better side of him, and he was writhing in torment, and pleading with her to go, to leave him to his fate, since the suffering was intolerable and subjection preferable.

There was an hour of hideous battle, but somehow she managed to keep him quiet till midnight. And, seated beside him, watching him, Joan came to the conclusion that his was one of those strange cases of double personality of which she had read in medical books. It was impossible to reconcile this Lancaster in any way with the man whom she had seen momentarily at the hospital, and with the tyrant of the operating room. For that man was egotistical, base and ignoble, and this man was honest and true, with the morphine fiend, and the tyrant for a space, and under that pitiful load of shame she sensed the cleanness of the man's soul and its integrity.

Somehow she held this devil at bay until midnight, and then, with a second victory to his credit, he stretched out his arm for the hypodermic. Then Joan saw the look of contentment come into his face, heaved the satisfied sigh—and there was the old Lancaster before her, shifty, furtive, and false. No, not altogether, for something of that victory remained with him, the promise of renewed sobriety; the morphine devil was losing its grip. Ground had been won. It should never be ceded, Joan swore that as she watched by the bedside.

"Doctor Lancaster, you have promised me to sleep till 6," she said. "Can I trust you?"

"How can you doubt my word, Miss Wentworth?" asked Lancaster, with

an affectation of surprise. "Of course you can. You know, I am not a regular user of drugs. I have been overworked and I took morphine to make me sleep, and somehow it got a hold of me. I think I must be unusually susceptible to the drug."

The old lie of the stupid drug devil! But Joan had the storehouse key and she knew that it would require a hammer or ax to break down the strong door. And she would wake and hear him, and fight again as she had fought that morning.

"Then I am going to bed till 6," she said. "But, Miss Wentworth," he protested, "six hours is an impossible long period. Every three hours is my time, and now that I am on half doses—remember what Jenkins said this morning. You must go slowly with a confirmed drug user like myself."

"Stop! Don't listen to me!" he added suddenly. "You can trust me, Miss Wentworth. I'm going to fight this out, and win."

Joan bent over him. "Don't forget that, 'I am winning' whenever the pain seems uncontrollable and your voice seems gone. It won't last long, Doctor Lancaster, you are just losing this moment and nothing can harm you. Fight the good fight!"

He caught her hand and carried it to his lips. "Miss Wentworth, you are my good angel!" he cried. "I secured the services of an angel unaware," he added, looking at her with that pathetic humor which went straight to her heart. "I want to win for my sake. But why are you taking so much trouble for a worthless old fellow like me?"

"Don't flatter yourself that it is all for you, Doctor Lancaster. Perhaps I may want to save the most distinguished surgeon in the south. At her words he started, he stared at her, and then fell back upon the pillow, hiding his face. Joan turned away. Again she had touched some hidden spring of memory; what it was she could not know, but it was evident that she had wounded him to the quick.

Perhaps it was the contrast between the office he held and the man he had become. Perhaps it was the knowledge of his secret bondage which now broken him down at last and driven him back to the institute, and Myers, the morphine fiend, and the tyrant of the operating room. For that man was egotistical, base and ignoble, and this man was honest and true, with the morphine fiend, and the tyrant for a space, and under that pitiful load of shame she sensed the cleanness of the man's soul and its integrity.

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What had there been that had wrecked the man? Jenkins' hint at some funds of one thing and another, Lancaster, sunk as he was, was incapable of dishonesty. No, she must have placed a wrong construction on Jenkins' words. And in her sleep her brain went on puzzling over the problem. Only her body was quiescent, and it lay wearily in the bed like some chained captive.

But suddenly the urgent summons of the brain shook from it the remnants of sleep. Joan listened intently, awake upon the instant, as some wild creature of the woods that senses danger. Somebody was coming along the corridor.

The footfalls were so soft and stealthy that she might have thought she was dreaming, but for the sense of imminent danger, the knowledge of some malevolent design. The steps stopped and began again, the merest touches of sound against the silence of night, the lightest pattering of bare feet outside the door.

There was no moon, and the rain starlight outside only seemed to render darker the obscurity within. Yet, through the darkness Joan knew that a hand lay on the door knob, and that a figure watched her across the room. She leaped from her bed. "Who's there?" she called in tones that seemed to shock the silence.

She could see nothing now, and she dared not turn aside to light her lamp. She knew that the figure was crouching somewhere. She heard the softest breathing, but could not locate it in the room. She felt the atmosphere of evil that surrounded her, she started to cross the room, groping, with arms outstretched. Then she found the intruder and flung herself upon it.

Her left hand closed about a wrist, supple and strong. Her right hand held another hand. They wrestled in the darkness, their bodies tense but motionless, only the hands and wrist muscles at strife. Not a sound came from their lips.

Joan thought it was a woman's hands she held. Her fingers sought the menace in the closed fists. The left hand of the intruder was empty; but in the right hand was a jagged piece of a broken tumbler that tinkled to the floor.

As it fell the other leaped at her as if strung upon wires. Joan saw, very dimly, the face of Mrs. Dana. She was in her nightdress, with her feet bare, and the ferocity of her attack seemed atrocious in contrast with the expressionless, mask-like features. Only the eyes seemed alive, and they burned with implacable hatred, as if they meditated revenge for all the accumulation of a life's wrongs.

The woman bore Joan backward. The lamp fell crashing to the floor in a debacle of splintered glass. A chair was overturned. Mrs. Dana's hands caught Joan's throat, and they struggled in the darkness, crashing and there, upsetting the water pitcher, smashing into the swinging door. Underneath her Joan heard Mrs. Fraser moving, and doors opening. There were cries on the stairs.

For a few moments Joan felt no match for the onset of the madwoman, but Mrs. Dana's impulse was soon exhausted. Joan got her arms about her body, and then she saw the arms to her sides. Mrs. Dana suddenly became passive, and the lights in the eyes seemed to go out like extinguished candles.

Joan got the woman into the corridor. At the farther end a little lamp was burning. Mrs. Dana went with her quietly, walking like a mechanical figure. At the head of the stairs appeared the matron, wearing a white wrapper. Behind her Joan saw the startled faces of Myers and Lancaster. The girl and Mrs. Dana into her room and aisle. Fraser came at her heels, breathing hard in terror.

"Did she hurt you?" she gasped. "How did she get out? Who let her out? I told you that you were dangerous, but I never dreamed that she could pick that lock. Did she—did she try to harm you?"

"She had a piece of glass," said Joan, "but I got away from her."

"There was no glass in her room last evening," said the matron with conviction.

Lancaster was approaching. Joan was astounded to see the look of anger on his face. "Who opened that door?" he shouted.

"It's all right now, Doctor Lancaster," came the matron's voice from within.

But Lancaster was shaking with excitement. He swung round upon Myers.

"You are responsible for this!" he cried. "You know my one point that has to be carried out. I told you to get out before."

"But the doctor, don't exert yourself," said the secretary anxiously. "You're a sick man, you know. It was unfortunate, but I'll see it doesn't happen again."

"You're a sick man, you know," said Lancaster, "but I'll see it doesn't happen again."

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"You said I was your good angel," said Joan lightly.

"It was more than chance," said Lancaster seriously. "It was the happiest thing that has ever come to me. Doctor Lancaster, I am only too glad to have had the opportunity of being of service. It is what every nurse would have wished."

"No," he corrected her. "You have brought more than service to the institute. 'Do you know what you have brought? Hope!'"

She could hardly restrain her tears, as deeply as she moved. She put her hand upon his. "Doctor Lancaster, it must never leave you again, she answered. 'Lift up your eyes and look at the hills. How can you help but hope? Hope lies all about you!'"

"When a man lives in darkness," said Lancaster gravely, "